FROM THE BOOKSHELF #163 OCTOBER 19, 1976
GENE KERN

CROWNED HEADS BY THOMAS TRYON

ANNCR: THE VOICE OF AMERICA BRINGS YOU ANOTHER IN THE WEEKLY SERIES .... FROM THE BOOKSHELF .... IN WHICH WE REVIEW SOME OF THE BOOKS AMERICANS ARE READING. TODAY .... CROWNED HEADS, BY THOMAS TRYON, PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF. HERE IS BOOK EDITOR ---------- WITH GENE KERN'S REVIEW OF CROWNED HEADS.

EDITOR: "IT SEEMS TO ME THE REAL STARS, THE TRULY MARVELOUS PEOPLE IN THE WORLD, HOLD TWO ESSENTIALS IN COMMON. THEY'RE BASICALLY SIMPLE, AND SOMETHING OF THE CHILD REMAINS IN THEM..."

SO COMMENTS THE NARRATOR ABOUT ONE OF THE FOUR SEMI-FICTIONAL, CINEMA ROYALTY WHOSE SECRET LIVES MAKE UP THOMAS TRYON'S LATEST BEST-SELLING NOVEL, CROWNED HEADS. THAT BIT OF HOMELY PHILOSOPHY HAPPENS TO BE DIRECTED AT RUSSIAN-BORN FEDORA. HER FABULOUS CAREER SPANS FOUR DECADES BEGINNING WITH GERMAN-LANGUAGE SILENT FILMS IN NINETEEN SIXTEEN. BUT 'SIMPLE' AND 'CHILDLIKE' ALSO APPLIES TO TRYON'S OTHER HOLLYWOOD CREATIONS ....LORNA DOONE, THE NAIVE BLONDE WHO ACHIEVED STARDOM VIA THE PRODUCER'S BEDROOM ROUTE; ROBIN RANSOME, CUTEST OF BOY WONDERS WHO ADOPTED THE NAME "BOBBITT" FROM HIS SUPER-SUCCESSFUL FILM SERIES; AND THE GREAT WILLIE MARSH, SINGING-DANCING STAR WHO BECAME A WORLDWIDE SYMBOL OF ELEGANCE AND WIT.

IT'S QUITE A CONCOCTION THAT TRYON SERVES HIS READERS, AND THE BEST-SELLERS' LIST SHOWS THEY ARE ENJOYING IT. THOUGH HE DELIBERATELY DODGES IDENTIFYING HIS CHARACTERS WITH REAL

EDITOR: (CONT'D) PEOPLE, AT LEAST CERTAIN TALENTS IN COMMON MAKE IT INEVITABLE THAT FILM BUFFS WILL CONJURE UP SUCH NAMES AS GRETA GARBO AND GLORIA SWANSON, MARILYN MONROE, MICKEY ROONEY, FREDDIE BARTHOLOMEW, FRED ASTAIRE AND DAVID NIVEN -- TO NAME A FEW. BUT THERE THE SIMILARITY ENDS. IN ORDER TO PROVE THE TRUTH OF THE QUOTATION "UNEASY LIES THE HEAD THAT WEARS THE CROWN" -- WHICH PROVIDED THE AUTHOR THE INSPIRATION FOR HIS TITLE "CROWNED HEADS," -- TRYON PUTS HIS CHARACTERS THROUGH MELODRAMATIC SITUATIONS THAT RIVAL THE MOST LURID SCREEN TABLOIDS OF HOLLYWOOD'S HEYDAY.

FEDORA, DESCRIBED AS "THE PERFECT WORK OF ART," IS SEEMINGLY THE AGELESS GODDESS INCARNATE. BUT, AS A RESULT OF SOME PUBLICITY AGENT'S DETECTIVE WORK, IT'S DISCOVERED THAT FEDORA IS, IN REALITY, TWO PERSONS.

WHEN THE EARLY FILM STAR BECOMES PREMATURELY OLD, SHE IS REPLACED BY HER ILLEGITIMATE DRUG-ADDICTED DAUGHTER. THE AUTHOR PORTRAYS HER MOTHER WAITING FOR GRIM DEATH IN SECLUSION ON THE ISLAND OF CRETE.

STAR NUMBER TWO, LORNA DOONE, IS "THE ALL-AMERICAN COOKIE," THE SUPREME SEX-SYMBOL -- FOR WHOM "ACTING HAD NEVER BEEN AN END, BUT A MEANS TO AN END. SHE WAS NEVER GOOD AT MATHEMATICS, BUT ONE EQUATION SHE KNEW: WORK AND BED = SUCCESS. SUCCESS = FAME = HAPPINESS." SUFFERING FROM A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN LORNA GOES TO A SECLUDED MEXICAN PARADISE RESORT TO RECUPERATE. BUT INSTEAD OF THE PEACE AND HARMONY SHE CRAVES, JEALOUSY AND SELF-PITY GRADUALLY DRAW HER INTO

EDITOR: (CONT'D) A HELLISH VOTEX OF SEX AND ALCOHOL. THE STORY ENDS IN RAPE AND HIDEOUS DEATH FROM A PASSIONATE ORGY OF SNAKEBITES, THE FINAL AGONY TAKING PLACE ON A PRE-COLUMBIAN MONUMENT, PRESUMDABLY FOR HUMAN SACRIFICE, HIGH ABOVE THE JUNGLE.

THE FATE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL OF TRYON'S ROYAL QUARTET, WILLIE MARSH, "THE GRAND OLD MAN OF HOLLYWOOD," IS EQUALLY GRUESOME.

AFTER THE UNTIMELY DEATH OF BEA MARSH, HIS PARTNER-MENTOR-MATE-MOTHER, HE SECLUDES HIMSELF IN HIS CASTLE OVERLOOKING THE VAST PANORAMA OF LOS ANGELES. HERE IS THE AUTHOR'S DESCRIPTION:

VOICE: "IT WAS A NEW, ALIEN WORLD, INTO WHICH HE SELDOM VENTURES... HAUNTED BY THE PAST, HATING THE PRESENT, TERRIFIED OF THE FUTURE, HE HAS HUNG ON, BUT ONLY BY HIS EYETEETH, AND THOSE NOT HIS OWN BUT AN EXPENSIVE DENTIST'S IN NEW YORK."

EDITOR: ONE EVENING, AFTER THE SERVANTS HAVE LEFT AND WILLIE IS PREPARING TO WATCH ONE OF HIS OLD MOVIES ON TELEVISION, HIS HOME IS INVADED BY A FAR-OUT TRIO OF YOUNGSTERS. AFTER TAKING ADVANTAGE OF HIS HOSPITALITY, THEY GET WILLIE DRUNK AND THEN TRAMPLE MERCILESSLY ON ALL HIS TREASURES, MEMORIES AS WELL AS VALUABLE MEMORABILIA. AFTER A VAIN EFFORT TO MAKE HIM REVEAL AND OPEN HIS SAFE, THEY TORTURE HIM TO DEATH.

THE BOY WONDER, BOBBITT, IS THE ONLY ONE OF THE FOURSOME TO SURVIVE. HE OUTGROWS HIS FABULOUS SUCCESS, ONLY TO FACE ANONYMITY:

VOICE: "AND THERE IT WAS. THE END. TIME ALONE HAD PUT THE QUIETUS TO THE CAREER OF THE LOVABLE TYKE WHOSE FACE HAD APPEARED ABOVE A SINGLE MATCH FLAME IN THE DARKNESS OF AN AIR RAID; THE FLAME HAD BURNED OUT AND IN NO TIME HE WAS FORGOTTEN."

EDITOR: NOW IN HIS THIRTIES, BOBBITT ENJOYS DISGUISING HIMSELF AS A CLOWN ENTERTAINING CHILDREN IN A NEW YORK PARK. THERE, HE IS RE-DISCOVERED AND RESURRRECTED BY AN OLD FRIEND, AN ELDERLY ACTRESS-COLLEAGUE, WHO LEADS HIM THROUGH COMPLEX FANTASIES TO THE REALITY OF A SUCCESSFUL COMEBACK.

CROWNED HEADS IS NOT AS SUPERFICIAL AS THESE SEPARATE STORY THREADS MAY MAKE IT APPEAR. FOR ONE THING, THEY ARE CLEVERLY INTERTWINED, THE CHARACTERS APPEARING AND RE-APPEARING AT APPROPRIATE AND LOGICAL OCCASIONS. /SOME OF THEM PLAY TOGETHER IN VARIOUS FILMS, AND ALL FOUR APPEAR IN "THE MIRACLE OF SANTI CRISTI." THAT NINETEEN FIFTY-FIVE EPIC STARRED WILLIE MARSH, FEATURED THE THEN JUVENILES LORNA DOONE AND ROBIN RANSONE, AND BROUGHT BACK TO MILLIONS OF ADORING FANS THE AGELESS BEAUTY OF THE FACE OF FEDORA. TRYON DESCRIBES THE PREMIERE:

OPT

VOICE: "PINS COULD HAVE BEEN HEARD TO DROP IN THE THEATRES AS THE BOY KNELT IN THE DARKENED CHURCH AND SAW THE RADIANT VISION EMERGING FROM THE SHADOWS OF THE SACRISTY. SHE STOOD THERE, ROBED IN WHITE, WITH A BLUE MANTLE, A GIRDLE OF GOLD, THE CROWN OF HEAVEN ON HER HEAD, SURROUNDED BY A GLINTING NIMBUS OF SHIMMERING LIGHT, THROUGH WHICH COULD BE DISCERNED A FACE." /

EDITOR: IT IS DIFFICULT TO WRITE EVEN FICTION ABOUT HOLLYWOOD'S MOTION PICTURE INDUSTRY AND ITS STAR SYSTEM WITHOUT MORALIZING, AND TRYON IS NO EXCEPTION: DESPITE FAME AND FORTUNE, THE CROWNED HEADS ARE INSECURE. FILM PERSONALITIES LIKE OTHER FASHIONS GO OUT OF STYLE, SOME SOONER THAN OTHERS. "I HAD EVERYTHING EXCEPT THE ONE THING I NEEDED," CHILD STAR BOBBITT REFLECTS... "TO KNOW WHAT THE WORLD WAS LIKE... TO KNOW WHAT WAS TRUE...THEN ONE DAY IT WAS GONE, EVERYTHING, OVERNIGHT." SO SOME OF THE "GREAT ONES," HAVING LIVED SO SUCCESSFULLY IN THE MEDIUM OF PRETEND, FIND THE CHANGE TOO HARD TO BEAR AND SLIP INTO NEW FANTASIES, MORE COMFORTABLE THAN THE HARD REALITIES OF ORDINARY LIVING.

FOR THE MANY READERS INTRIGUED BY THE SENSATIONAL IN THE CELEBRITY WAY OF LIFE, THE BOOK IS A MEATY MORSEL, NEATLY CONTRIVED AND PACKAGED.

ANNCR: YOU HAVE BEEN LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF AMERICA WEEKLY PROGRAM FROM THE BOOKSHELF IN WHICH WE DISCUSS BOOKS AMERICANS ARE READING. TODAY'S SELECTION WAS CROWNED HEADS, A NOVEL BY THOMAS TRYON. JOIN US NEXT WEEK (AT THE SAME TIME) FOR ANOTHER SELECTION FROM THE BOOKSHELF.

-0-

DK/CAK